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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

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Wordsworth's 'Prelude'

By

The Rt. Hon. Viscount Grey of Fallodon, K.G.

President, 1923

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This pamphlet is the Presidential Address which was spoken by the Right Hon. Viscount Grey of Fallodon, K.G., at the Annual General Meeting on May 26.

WORDSWORTH'S *PRELUDE*

SIR ARTHUR ACLAND said that the Committee had done him a kindness in asking him to take the Chair this afternoon. Let me add to that that the Committee have done me a kindness also in asking Sir Arthur to take the Chair, for he is one of my oldest and most valued friends. I am glad he gave you that touch of reminiscence of Mr. Burt, one of the finest and rarest spirits who ever sat in the House of Commons, and I am fortified in my choice of a subject by the memory recalled by Sir Arthur Acland of Mr. Burt's appreciation of Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Nevertheless, I am not at all sure that I have been wise in choosing that subject. I came to the conclusion, in the course of preparation, that it had been unwise to embark on the subject of *The Prelude* without confining and condensing my thoughts within the limits of a written manuscript. But as I have only an average verbal memory—that is to say a comparatively poor one—I cannot repeat what I have written at any length, and as my sight is much below the average, I cannot with ease read what I have written. I have therefore to embark on the subject of *The Prelude* without that help of the written manuscript, and I fear that I may find the subject unmanageable. If so, I must ask for your forbearance. First of all, let me say, that like many lovers of Wordsworth, I not only find *The Prelude* very interesting, but every time I read it the interest to be found in it grows wider and deeper and more intense, so that it ranks very high indeed in Wordsworth's work. This estimate of *The Prelude* is by no means universal. I once possessed—I am glad to say that I possess it no longer—a copy of an edition of Wordsworth in one volume, in which I was disappointed not to find *The Prelude*. On turning to the Preface I found it stated that the volume contained all the poems of Wordsworth which were of real value, and that the only omissions were of poems such as *The Prelude*, which were by general consent not up to the mark; I have even found myself an object of pity to at least one literary friend for reading *The Excursion* or *The Prelude* at all. I once heard a distinguished man describe the speeches of another man also distinguished, whose speeches were full of learning, but more copious than inspiring, as being like a magnum of soda water that had stood uncorked for a week. To some people,

I fear, *The Prelude* and *Excursion* appear dreary and flat. As against their depreciation, I will read you an appreciation of *The Prelude* from a very unexpected quarter—the words are these: ‘When I came in after years to read *The Prelude*, I recognized, as if it were my own history which was being told, the steps by which the love of the country boy for his hills and moors grew into poetical susceptibility for all imaginative presentations of beauty in every direction.’ I think I might safely say that no man or woman in this room, however great their literary knowledge, unless they already know from whom that quotation comes, would guess the author of it. It comes from one who was apt to depreciate rather than appreciate many things about which others were enthusiastic. The words are those of Mark Pattison. You may set that unexpected appreciation of *The Prelude* against much depreciation of it; Mark Pattison says here just what makes many of us feel Wordsworth a special poet, the sense that in him we find our own experiences reproduced. As we read him, we constantly find ourselves saying: ‘I know that I have felt that.’ And sometimes he reveals to us what we have not been previously conscious of, so that we say: ‘I have felt that without knowing it.’ Thus to those of us who have the same sort of susceptibility that Wordsworth had to all the aspects of natural beauty, his poetry becomes something not to be measured merely by poetic merit, but something which reproduces, interprets, and reveals to us our own experiences, and is therefore not like something outside appealing to our admiration but like something which is akin to us, part of ourselves, part of our lives. Therefore, in speaking especially of *The Prelude*, I am not going to talk of its poetic merit or speak of it as a poem, though it has passages which seem to me of the highest poetical beauty. I want to speak of it as what it really is, an autobiography, a document of real authentic human interest. It begins with a description of Wordsworth’s childhood and schooltimes, and as you read on in *The Prelude* you realize, or at least I realize, especially four things about Wordsworth: his extraordinary independence of spirit; his resentment at any restraint; his deep and unflinching love of liberty for himself and for the world; and finally, his firm conviction that it is not through knowledge that we grow—unless that knowledge be accompanied by feeling—that great, pure, exalted thoughts are due not to knowledge, but to right and elevated feeling. Those four things I find coming out again and again in *The Prelude*. First take his childhood. His childhood really was incredibly free. At five years old, he was making ‘one long bathing of a summer’s day’

in a small mill-race separated from the main stream. At ten years old he was out half the night in the late Autumn or the early Winter, alone on the hills, scudding from snare to snare, which he had set for woodcocks, taking the woodcocks from his own snares and sometimes taking those that were not in his snares but were caught in the snares set by another boy. That act he knew was wrong; he tells us how the consciousness of wrongdoing wrought on him; he says :

‘ . . . and when the deed was done
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.’

I will take one more passage parallel to that. Again he does something that he feels to be wrong. He finds a boat tied to a willow tree on a moonlit night. He looses the boat and rows himself out on to the lake in it. It was, he says, an act of stealth. As he rowed, taking pride in his rowing, rising on his oars, he fixed his eyes on a bare ridge above which was nothing visible but the sky; as he rowed farther, gradually there opened up the view of a high, dark peak behind the ridge, and as he rowed on, the peak grew in height until it seemed to be something great and immense that was stalking after him. His conscience smote him, he took the boat back to the willow tree and he went home, but after that his conscience working in him, he was haunted by the vision he had seen of the peak. In a passage, too long to quote in full, he tells what he felt, and he ends with these words :

‘ . . . for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o’er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.’

I quote these passages to make this observation. You observe that on both occasions, he thought in himself that the acts he had done were wrong. There is no trace that he felt any fear of being found out, no trace that he dreaded human censure or punishment by his guardians or those who looked after him, or by any human agency; no trace of his caring for what others might think of his conduct.

His own conscience finds the reproof in what he thinks he sees in the aspects of nature; and so you will find throughout *The Prelude* an almost abnormal indifference to human censure; he is never depressed by blame nor elated by praise, but constantly worked upon by his susceptibility to the outward aspects of nature. In that alone he found his education and discipline. He goes on to describe various things in childhood—all examples of a wonderfully free life—in words that bring home to us the experience of our own boyhoods; things like his climbing cliffs for the raven's nest on a precipice so steep that he seemed hardly to be supported by foothold or handhold, but almost to be suspended in air; and then he says:

‘With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth—and with what motion moved the clouds!’

Passages like that abound, and as you read on and turn the pages you see ‘Schooltime’ ‘Schooltime’ ‘Schooltime’ all through two books at the top of every page; and in the text not a single mention of his once entering a school, having any lessons or teaching or discipline, any rewards or any punishment, and he sums up at last by a passage—again too long to quote—in which he says that he and his companions loved sitting up late at night till all other lights were out, scampering over the country in the daytime, leading a life of sheer pleasure so far as we can judge from *The Prelude*, innocent but uninterrupted perpetual pleasure: and then there is this other touch, that though he sat up with his companions late at night, he would get up for his own pleasure early in the morning, sometimes going five miles around the lake before schooltime; sometimes sitting alone in the wood in the early morning, or on some promontory, and then there came to him these feelings even as a boy, which we find so constant in his poetry afterwards; the feeling as if bodily eyes were utterly forgotten. Finally comes this touching tribute in blank verse to the place where the days of his childhood were spent:

‘Dear native Regions, wheresoe’er shall close
My mortal course, there will I think on you;
Dying, will cast on you a backward look;
Even as this setting sun (albeit the Vale
Is no where touched by one memorial gleam)
Doth with the fond remains of his last power
Still linger, and a farewell lustre sheds,
On the dear mountain-tops where first he rose.’

I quote that because Wordsworth did what I have not known an

instance of another poet having done. He afterwards wrote it in rhyme and published it separately, and I will give it to you from memory as it is in that form :

‘ Dear native Regions, I foretell,
From what I feel at this farewell,
That, wheresoe’er my steps may tend,
And whensoever my course shall end,
If in that hour a single tie
Survive of local sympathy,
My soul will cast the backward view,
The longing look alone on you.

Thus, while the sun sinks down to rest,
Far in the regions of the West,
Though to the vale no parting beam
Be given, not one memorial gleam,
A lingering light he fondly throws
On the dear hills where first he rose.’

You can read these two passages for yourselves, the one in blank verse, and the other in rhyme, and consider at leisure which you think the best of the two.

When Wordsworth parts from school, when his schooltime is over, he pays a tribute, not as we mostly do to masters or to the spirit of the school ; he says that he left school with his heart pure, free from low desires, and that this was due to the country in which he lived.

Now I pass from his schooltime to his time at Cambridge. With that independent spirit of his, he did not seem to find his entry into the University formidable. We, most of us, who have been to Universities, in our first days or weeks have found the beginning rather formidable. There is no trace that Wordsworth found it so. But he did not get much good out of the University, he says he felt that he ‘ was not for that time or for that place ’. One splendid tribute he pays to the statue of Newton :

‘ Newton with his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind for ever
Voyaging through strange seas of Thought alone.’

A tribute he pays also to Milton, but connected with the name of Milton there is an incident in *The Prelude* of a lighter kind. He drank wine in Milton’s rooms with some friends, and he poured out libations to that famous memory until his head grew dizzy with the fumes of wine ; he is careful to tell us that this never happened before or since. About this incident I must relate the story of an

admirer of Wordsworth arguing with some one who did not admire Wordsworth. The former found himself confronted with the argument that Wordsworth was a prig without any natural weaknesses. I suppose if he had known the phrase the critic would have said: 'Without one redeeming vice.' The admirer of Wordsworth in defence said: 'Well, at any rate, he got drunk once.' 'Yes,' said the other, 'I know he says so, but I am afraid his standard of intoxication was lamentably low.' I put that on record as a lighter touch. Wordsworth proceeds to say in justice to Cambridge that if he got little good from it, the fault was his own, and not that of any one else, and, having thus satisfied his conscience by blaming himself, he then goes on to say how unedifying he found the place. He said of the Dons: 'They served to set our minds on edge and did no more.' You can compare that with Gibbons' more flippant statement about his tutor at Oxford: 'He remembered he had a salary to receive; he only forgot he had a duty to perform.' You cannot read *The Prelude* without feeling that the strictures on the University had at any rate some truth in them in those days, but let me say at once that nothing of that kind is true to-day. If the Universities of the eighteenth century were dead, it is true of them to-day that they are living parts of the nation, that those who are most concerned in their teaching are most careful to keep in touch with the political, economic, and social thought of the day, and Oxford and Cambridge, with other Universities, are to-day living parts of the nation's life. Wordsworth closes his description of Cambridge with an extraordinarily powerful passage describing what he felt not only about those in authority, but about the undergraduates as well:

'Idleness halting with his weary clog,
And poor misguided Shame, and witless Fear,
And simple Pleasure foraging for Death;
Honour misplaced, and Dignity astray;
Feuds, factions, flatteries, enmity, and guile,
Murmuring submission, and bald government,
(The idol weak as the idolater),
And Decency and Custom starving Truth,
And blind Authority beating with his staff
The child that might have led him; Emptiness
Followed as of good omen, and meek Worth
Left to herself unheard of and unknown.'

And so he parts from Cambridge.

I have now spent much time and I have not got beyond his University life. I must pass over the part about his Summer vaca-

tion, although it has that very important and interesting passage in it where, in the presence of a splendid sunrise, alone after a night of revelry, he feels that he is ever afterwards to be a dedicated spirit, and having said that and described that experience, he says :

‘ . . . on I walked
in thankful blessedness, which yet survives.’

I want you to notice those last three words : ‘ which yet survives.’

The Prelude was written not in extreme youth but when he was in the thirties, in the prime of his poetic gifts and power, and that emotion of his early youth still survived. Most of us have these moments of great emotion under peculiarly favourable conditions of outward circumstance. We all recognize, or at least most of us must recognize having felt amongst particularly grand or beautiful aspects of nature what Wordsworth felt on the occasion of that memorable sunrise ; but with most of us the emotions are like a breeze upon a lake, making its ripple at the time and then leaving the lake as it was before. With most of us, it is not so much that we are incapable of these great moments of great emotions as that they are, as far as we are concerned, rather like writing in water. With Wordsworth it was not so. They lasted. The substance of which he was made was something so tenacious, that when these great moments of emotion came, they wrote indelibly upon his personality ; their effect was cumulative, they built him up and made him the great poet that he was, and those words ‘ which yet survives ’ would apply no doubt to many of those great moments in his life. It seems to me that one of the special characteristics of Wordsworth in his youth was this combination of extreme susceptibility with great tenacity. That was a quality in Wordsworth which I think accounts for very much of the poetic excellence of what he wrote and for the power which his poetry has.

I come now to the next book, which is headed ‘ Books ’, and I would observe two points about it, which are : (1) that he states absolutely and without qualification that for the young there should be complete liberty in reading ; there should be no restraint upon their choice of books. I know that this must be a very controversial subject ; personally, I side with Wordsworth. He takes the homely simile of a hen with her chickens, and he applies that to the supervision over the reading of the young. He says :

‘ Behold the parent hen amid her brood ;
Yet doth she little more
Than move with them in tenderness and love.’

I would observe however on this simile that, although it is absolutely true to the life of what some birds do, or appear to do as regards their young, when the young are able to feed themselves, the mother bird does lead the young where the best food is to be found, and I think a fair summary of Wordsworth's view of reading for young people is that they should be put in the way of the best literature, and should then be left to choose for themselves what they like best; (2) the other point is that knowledge got from reading will not do us good unless it produces real feeling; that emotion must accompany knowledge. He pays a great tribute to what he owed to books, but he says he got from them knowledge with continually increasing joy, 'knowledge not purchased with the lack of power', and he has a long passage, and an exceedingly good one, in which he expresses his scorn of the prig who reads merely in order to acquire knowledge without thereby growing in feeling and sensitiveness. Here are a few lines of it:

' . . . he sifts, he weighs;
All things are put to question; he must live
Knowing that he grows wiser every day
Or else not live at all, and seeing too
Each little drop of wisdom as it falls
Into the dimpling cistern of his heart:
For this unnatural growth the trainer blame,
Pity the tree.—Poor human vanity,
Wert thou extinguished, little would be left
Which he could truly love; . . . '

And then comes a burst of enthusiasm and contrast at the end:

' Oh! give us once again the wishing-cap
Of Fortunatus, and the invisible coat
Of Jack the Giant-Killer, Robin Hood,
And Sabra in the forest with St. George!
The child whose love is here, at least, doth reap
One precious gain, that he forgets himself.'

Well, that has wisdom in it for all of us who are in search either of knowledge or pleasure. We get neither in their highest form unless we seek them in such a way, with such enthusiasm, with such feeling that we forget ourselves. It is true we find ourselves thereby, but we find ourselves by forgetting ourselves. That inability to forget one's self stands more almost than anything else in the way of the use people make of knowledge or of gifts, and stands often in their way even when they are trying to find pleasure. I think one of the saddest things, as you reflect on the history of the world, is the mischief which has been done, the opportunities which have been missed, by

men with great powers in great place being unable to forget themselves. It is a natural failing. The greater a man's powers, the more difficult it is for him to forget himself, and it is only when you come to the very great men of the world, whose greatness of soul and strength of moral purpose were greater even than their great powers, that you find the men, who in public affairs have had great opportunities and risen to the full height of them and done all they might for the world. The ending of that passage :

‘ . . . doth reap

One precious gain, that he forgets himself ’

is one of far-reaching wisdom and interest.

Now I must pass on to another part of *The Prelude* altogether, for I must, before I finish, say something about Wordsworth's experience in the French Revolution. It had a remarkable effect upon him as a young man, and no study of Wordsworth's life, no appreciation of his work can be thoroughly intelligent without reading carefully that record, which we find given directly in *The Prelude* and indirectly in *The Excursion*, of his experiences in France. He first went to France on his way to the Alps. At that time the States General had been summoned, and though the Monarchy had not been abolished, there was a belief throughout France that the day of Liberty had come, and that the old bad times were past, and the description Wordsworth gives of the rapture manifest in the whole country is very powerful and very touching. He says :

‘ France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again.
Lightly equipped, and but a few brief looks
Cast on the white cliffs of our native shore
From the receding vessel's deck, we chanced
To land at Calais on the very eve
Of that great federal day ; and there we saw,
In a mean city, and among a few,
How bright a face is worn when joy of one
Is joy for tens of millions. Southward thence
We held our way, direct through hamlets, towns,
Gaudy with reliques of that festival,
Flowers left to wither on triumphal arcs,
And window-garlands. On the public roads,
And, once, three days successively, through paths
By which our toilsome journey was abridged,
Among sequestered villages we walked
And found benevolence and blessedness
Spread like a fragrance everywhere, when Spring
Hath left no corner of the land untouched ; . . . ’

'War shall cease; did ye not hear that conquest is abjured?' the peasants say to him, and we realize what a fair face the dawn of the French Revolution had. I recalled this description when I was at the Foreign Office at the time of the Young Turk Revolution. We had reports then of people belonging to different races between whom there had been bitter enmity, now greeting each other as brothers, and in a still shorter time than in the French Revolution, things went back, not to the same despotism of Abdul Hamid, but to one worse, if possible, than that before. What happened in the beginning of the Russian Revolution I do not know so well, because I was not in office at the time. As we read the description in Wordsworth of the beginning of the French Revolution, we realize all that he felt and all that the young literary spirits of the day felt about it. They felt that man was naturally a being intended for good, and of great dignity; that he had been kept back by the barriers of an old system; that the Revolution had swept away these old barriers, and that man for the first time in civilized history was going to be free, to advance towards what was his natural heritage, to what he deserved, and to what was his right. You must read carefully to realize the natural enthusiasm that Wordsworth and others like him felt. Then came the beginning of bloodshed and violence. Wordsworth did not ignore that, and its incidents he called

'Ephemeral monsters, to be seen but once!
Things that could only show themselves and die',

but when he found England going to war with France, while he thought that in France was the fairest hope, indeed the whole hope, and the promise of human liberty and happiness, he felt it bitterly. He described his feelings in a stern passage where he says that if he went to church and heard prayers for the victories of the British Forces, he felt as if he were sitting there 'like an uninvited guest' whom no one owned, and instead of praying for the success of the British Forces, he 'fed on the day of vengeance yet to come'. Such was his love of liberty, such was his feeling when he saw England in arms against France, and when he thought that Liberty was on the side of France; but when France became the aggressor, when he became convinced later on that the cause of Liberty was with his own country and the cause of the aggressor and despotism was with France, then he produced that strong, patriotic war poetry which during the last war my friend, Sir Arthur Acland, collected into a volume, and which was no doubt read by many people and gave them, through the distress of war, something of that strength of spirit with

which Wordsworth went through the distress of the Napoleonic wars. When France became an aggressor, and exhibited the horrors of the Terror, nothing could surpass the bitter disappointment that Wordsworth felt. His disappointment was great in proportion as his hopes had been high; he gives a powerful description of the distress of mind and the despair through which he went. At one time he says he 'yielded up all moral questions in despair', yet he never doubted what the real cause of the French Revolution was; nothing could shake his moral judgement about that. When other people were pointing to all these horrors and saying :

‘Behold the harvest that we reap
From popular government and equality,’

Wordsworth, in spite of his distress, says :

‘I clearly saw that neither these nor aught
Of wild belief engrafted on their names
By false philosophy had caused the woe,
But a terrific reservoir of guilt
And ignorance filled up from age to age,
That could no longer hold its loathsome charge,
But burst and spread in deluge through the land.’

And when he saw Europe beginning to attack the French Revolution, and attempting to put it down, and to re-establish the Monarchy, though he was not blind to the violence and the bloodshed of those who were then in power in France, he says :

‘In France, the men, who for their desperate ends,
Had plucked up mercy by the roots, were glad
Of this new enemy. Tyrants, strong before
In wicked pleas, were strong as demons now.’

Thus he pronounced a wise political judgement upon the un-wisdom of interfering with the Revolution from outside. In the whole of Wordsworth's account of the Revolution, there is nothing with more insight than this wise political judgement; there is deep political wisdom in it for all similar occurrences, and if these words,

‘... the men, who for their desperate ends,
Had plucked up mercy by the roots, were glad
Of this new enemy ...’

whenever a great Revolution takes place in a foreign country, were hung on the walls of rooms where Cabinets meet, we might have been saved, and the French Government with us, from the mistake of spending millions in trying to crush the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The Bolsheviks were the men who ‘plucked up mercy by

the roots' in Russia. Wordsworth would not have been more sparing in his condemnation of them than he was in his condemnation of the Jacobins, but we might have remembered from these great events that in such times interference from outside has, as a consequence, results directly the opposite to what it is intended and hoped. As it was in the French Revolution, so it has been in the Russian Revolution. Finally, when Wordsworth 'yielded up all moral questions in despair', and this is my last point, to illustrate one more great characteristic of Wordsworth—he does not sit down under that despair. Whatever depression he goes through, he never ends the poem until he has found the thought which sets him on his feet, upright, above depression. You find it in poem after poem. However great the depression, and it was at times as great as ever poet had, he never rests until he has found the point of view and the thought in which he can be strong again; where, instead of being a pessimist, he can be hopeful, sanguine, certain as regards the future. Thus in his depression in the French Revolution, he finds hope at last, and finds it through the help of his sister Dorothy Wordsworth, who leads him back to the influence of nature. I will give this quotation, coming after he had 'yielded up moral questions in despair':

'She whispered still that brightness would return;
 She, in the midst of all, preserved me still
 A poet, made me seek beneath that name,
 And that alone, my office upon earth;
 And, lastly, as hereafter will be shown,
 If willing audience fail not, Nature's self,
 By all varieties of human love
 Assisted, led me back through opening day
 To those sweet counsels between head and heart
 Whence grew that genuine knowledge, fraught with peace,
 Which, through the later sinkings of this cause,
 Hath still upheld me, and upholds me now.'

And there he gets strength again with the help of his sister, by his susceptibility to the influences of nature. It is in that susceptibility to the influences of nature that the greatest strength of his poetry lies. I have read somewhere that when Wordsworth writes:

'One impulse from a vernal wood,
 May teach you more of man,
 Of moral evil and of good,
 Than all the sages can',

we must not take him seriously, for the impulse of the vernal wood

can teach us nothing. But this in truth is the very root of Wordsworth's own growth and education. Without the impulse from the vernal wood he would not have written his poetry, without that and many other impulses akin to it. This does not mean that the vernal wood consciously taught him, it means that looking on the vernal wood he was raised to heights of sensitive feeling without which he would not have had the great thoughts that inspired his poetry. It is that susceptibility to outward nature that Wordsworth had in a supreme degree, which draws all those who have it, even in less degree, to his poetry and makes them satisfied. Reverence, pure delight, tenderness, love, these things he felt because the aspects of nature, their beauty, and their grandeur had inspired these feelings in him. To those of us who love Wordsworth, those moods, those exalted moods, which he had under the influence of natural beauty, though we may not have them so intensely or so often as he had them, are well known, as something which we recognize in our own experience. Simple lines of Wordsworth, for instance: 'and that still spirit shed from evening air', 'motions of delight that haunt the sides of the green hills', 'The silence that is in the starry sky; the sleep that is among the lonely hills'. Even such a simple line as: 'Here are we in a bright and breathing world' stir us to a mood like his own. To those who are familiar with Wordsworth a single line may be sufficient to bring us under that sweet influence, that powerful influence of the beauty of outward nature which gives us some of the best moods in our life. One of the greatest gifts that man can have is to be able to get such moods; as Wordsworth calls:

'That serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.'

